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ABSTRACT

Rather than being trained and supervised, graduate teaching assistants in rhetoric and speech should be taught and advised. Teaching assistants, or graduate instructors, should be considered colleagues, not merely cheap labor to teach courses the rest of the faculty does not want to teach. The first step in establishing an effective teaching and advising program for graduate instructors, then, is to create a department atmosphere in which they are truly accepted and valued as teaching colleagues. At the University of Iowa, a three- to four-day pre-service workshop is provided for all new graduate instructors during which they are assigned to advisory groups led by experienced graduate instructors. New graduate instructors also attend a weekly seminar during which they discuss the content of their classes and issues such as responding to student papers and speeches, how to lead a discussion of an essay, and how to structure assignments to meet the goals of the program. Finally, graduate instructors are given increasing degrees of freedom in the classroom to learn their own skills, strengths, and limitations as teachers. (SRT)

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A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM FOR GRADUATE INSTRUCTORS IN COMMUNICATION AND COMPOSITION

Speech Communication Association Convention
Chicago, Illinois
November 15, 1986

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After attending various basic course conferences and special convention programs on the basic course at regional and national conventions for the past dozen years, I am not sure that I can add anything new to the continually discussed issue of training and supervising teaching assistants. If I had the power to effect any meaningful change in the discussion, however, I would ban the use of the terms "training" and "supervising" and replace them with "teaching" and "advising." While that may seem like a minor change, the ramifications and implications of accepting the new terms would result in rather dramatic alterations in many basic course programs across the country.

Perhaps some academic disciplines actually do use their teaching assistants in ways which demand that they be trained and closely supervised. The interest in the issue is certainly growing and many disciplines are looking to communication and composition programs for examples because of our relatively long history of concern for the classroom abilities of our teaching assistants. I was asked earlier this year, for example, to represent the departmental chairperson's perspective on the employment and education of teaching assistants at the first annual National Teaching Assistant Conference to be held next week at The Ohio State University. Few other disciplines have given their teaching assistants the degree of teaching and classroom responsibility that seems to be the norm in communication studies and composition, and many administrators from other disciplines are increasingly interested in how we "train and supervise" our graduate teaching assistants. Many of them may want to "train" their TAs to conduct specific lab experiments or to lecture or to grade exams. They may feel the need to supervise all TAs closely to ensure that they are following the text exactly and preparing all students to pass the same exams.

I don't want to be included in this group of zoo keepers concerned with training the monkeys and dogs to jump through the right hoops at the right time. By defining our primary responsibilities as teaching and advising rather than training and supervising, we change the relationship between the full-time faculty and the teaching assistants. If I were more confident that we knew exactly what should be taught, exactly when it should be taught, and precisely how it should be taught, I would be more willing to endorse the use of a lock-step, day-by-day syllabus and close supervision for all teaching

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assistants. If I shared many central administrators' concern that all students in a particular class do exactly the same assignment and read exactly the same material at the same time, I would be more willing to give all teaching assistants the same syllabus and demand that they conform to its requirements.

Many of these typical approaches to working with new teaching assistants are, unfortunately, based more on the theory of control than on acceptable theories of teaching/learning. If all of our teaching assistants are doing the same thing in the classroom at the same time, we at least are projecting the image of being in control to ourselves, our teaching assistants, our administration and our students. Although research in education is seldom conclusive, we do know that students are not equal--they learn at different rates, they have different experencies and abilities, their different cognitive styles allow them to learn more efficiently with different teaching strategies, and they respond differently to varying kinds of feedback and evaluation. No two basic course sections I have taught in the last fifteen years have been the same. Some strategies work well with some classes and fail with others. Certainly no two teachers are the same or could create the same atmosphere with a particular class. Some teaching strategies, assignments, and approaches will work for some teachers and not for others. The personality, confidence, and teaching style of the teacher must be considered in creating a plan for teaching any course.

In order to do that, we need to practice what we preach in our discipline as we prepare to work with graduate instructors in the basic course . Specifically we need to identify and give central consideration to the needs of our audience. In our pre-teaching workshops and weekly seminars, the audience is the group of graduate instructors we have hired to represent our department to our students. In the classrooms across the campus where the basic course becomes a reality, the audience is composed of sometimes widely varying groups of students. While I do agree there is a need for comparable kinds of classroom experiences and perhaps a common core of content material for all students enrolled in the basic course, I would argue that the mandatory use of a common syllabus is not necessarily the best means to that end.

The following guidelines for a program for teaching and advising graduate instructors reflect parts of our program at the University of Iowa. Although we are unique in that the "basic course" is a separate department answerable to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and it is a course which integrates the teaching of speaking, writing, and critical reading, we are similar in many ways to other large basic course programs across the country. In several ways, it would be considerably easier to implement such an approach in basic course programs which are smaller or which concentrate on teaching only speech. Although we do not have a common syllabus, we do provide all teachers with a set of Guidelines which describe the philosophy and general goals of the course. They also describe general units of instruction, provide a variety of suggestions concerning assignments and approaches, and provide a range of the number and kinds of assignments which are expected. The Rhetoric

Program includes 13 full-time faculty who are fully or jointly appointed in Rhetoric and 140 graduate instructors who teach around 8,000 students each year. Most of the graduate students who teach Rhetoric come from the Departments of English, Communication Studies, or Education. We also hire graduate instructors from Theatre, the Writers' Workshop, Journalism, Law, and other departments.

Some of these teachers have had considerable and varied teaching experience while others have never been in front of the classroom. Only a very few have received instruction and feedback regarding the teaching/learning process or even seriously discussed teaching as a profession. Nearly all are selected as graduate instructors because of their academic qualifications and potential, with little initial regard for their teaching ability or potential. In addition, their academic preparation may have very little to do with the teaching of writing, speech, or critical reading at the introductory level. We seem to assume that teaching is something anyone can do, frequently with little advice, guidance, or instruction. What we do with them in our Professional Development Program, then, takes on added importance.

The Professional Development Program

It is amazing how graduate instructors respond when you treat them like colleagues rather than simply as cheap labor to teach the courses the rest of the faculty does not want to teach. It is even more revealing when some departments tell the graduate instructors they will be treated like colleages and then refuse to allow them access to the power structure. They are not truly your teaching colleagues if few of the full-time faculty teach the basic course on a regular basis. They are not colleagues if they are denied access to important committees such as textbook selection, faculty recruitment, and other committees which make decisions which affect their classroom activities. They are not colleagues if they are denied the opportunity to be involved in policy decisions which affect their "training program" (which we call the Professional Development Program) and the courses they teach. They are not colleagues if the full-time faculty fails to take an active interest in their teaching as well as their academic progress.

Developing an appropriate atmosphere.

The first step in establishing an effective teaching and advising program for graduate instructors, then, is to create an appropriate atmosphere within your department where they are truly accepted and valued as teaching colleagues. That requires faculty support and active participation. Appointing a single non-tenured assistant professor to run the basic course program while the rest of the faculty ignors it is a very powerful symbolic statement. The entire faculty ought to be involved in the creation and implementation of the program for the graduate instructors. They ought to teach at least a section of the basic course each year. They need to participate in some of the instructional meetings and be willingly available to talk to their graduate students about matters related to teaching the basic course as well as those related to graduate study.

The faculty must be willing to extend a professional level of colleagial respect for the teaching efforts of the graduate students. The faculty must also agree on the goals of the teaching assistant program. The use of graduate instructors will provide the department with relative inexpensive instruction per credit hour and will allow the full-time faculty opportunities to teach something other than the basic course. These are very positive benefits which too many faculty take for granted. A primary goal of any effective teaching assistant program must be to help both experienced and inexperienced teachers become more confident, competent, and effective in the classroom. Accepting this as a goal of your program requires that you do much more than simply train and supervise graduate students to perform the same tasks in different classrooms at approximately the same time each semester. Accepting this goal does not mean that you are sacrificing the goal of providing quality instruction to the undergraduate students in your basic course. It does mean that you are more willing to tolerate some diversity in the basic course and willing to allow your teaching assistants to experiment with their teaching styles in the classroom and perhaps experience some failures as they attempt to find out what works for them in certain situations. In the long run, however, I am convinced this approach creates more confident and better teachers.

Once a department actually adopts this attitude and makes this kind of relationship between full-time faculty and graduate instructors a reality, the rest is comparatively easy. There are dozens of more prescriptive articles which identify the essential elements for any teaching assistant training program and provide models for such instruction. Without the proper attitude and support of the faculty and without general agreement on the importance of teaching and advising as opposed to training and supervising, such programs will never reach their full potential for the graduate instructors involved. The reason our graduate students fought to change their title from teaching assistant to graduate instructor and the reason we so readily agreed makes an important point. In our situation, and in most institutions, they are not teaching assistants. They do not simply lead discussion groups or grade exams or rate speeches. They teach--frequently more and better than those of us whom the name implies they assist.

<u>Evaluation of the program.</u>

Although a discusssion of evaluation would typically come after a discription of any program, it is appropriate to discuss the issue at this point. We have been evaluating this year's Professional Development Program and planning next year's program throughout this current semester and will continue to work on it through next summer. After our three-day pre-registration workshop for new graduate instructors, we asked everyone involved to evaluate the workshop. Five full-time faculty, five experienced graduate instructors, and 60 new graduate instructors were directly involved in every minute of the three long days of introduction to the Rhetoric Program. The rest of the faculty were involved in parts of the activities and presentations and the late Saturday afternoon party which ended the workshop. All participants evaluated the workshop in terms of what

was most effective, least effective, not clear, most necessary, most helpful, and so on from their own perspective. Those written evaluations form the basis for much of the content of the weekly seminars which continue throughout the semester. Although we attempt to cover the procedural issues such as student drops, mid-term grades, and evaluation of student work at particular times of the semester, we attempt to keep the schedule flexible enough to respond to the needs of the particular graduate instructors in the various groups. The workshop evaluation is followed by an informal mid-term evaluation and another written evaluation of the weekly sessions at the end of the semester. These evaluations are used by the teaching staff to adjust the schedule of the weekly sessions and to plan the sessions for the following year. Although evaluation is frequently viewed as the final activity of an educational interaction, we view it as a beginning and continual activity. Most importantly, we view the evaluation as important and use it to continually revise our program.

The Pre-service workshop.

Our pre-service workshop for all new graduate instructors runs for three or four days the week prior to the beginning of fall classes. Each new instructor is placed in an advisory group with 12-15 peers and two advisory group leaders, a full-time faculty member and an experienced graduate instructor who was competitively selected by the faculty. Our goals for this workshop are similar to others across the country. We want the new graduate instructors to begin to think of themselves as members of our faculty, as colleagues who share an important task in the operation of our department. We also want to help reduce their anxiety about teaching and make them aware of the basic expectations for the course. The workshop also fulfills an important social function. The new graduate instructors are joining a very large faculty and many feel intimidated and lost with 150 colleagues. The smaller advisory groups, however, give them a much more meaningful support group and identity.

The initial impression of any situation is critically important and we try to make the new graduate instructors feel welcome and relaxed. After getting to know the other members of their advisory group we bring them together and get right to the issues which are most important to them at this time--how and when they will get their first paycheck, information about parking permits, offices, mailboxes, and fall registration. Once we get some of the "essentials" out of the way, we begin talking about the course and our general expectations. Throughout the workshop, we attempt to model the behavior we want them to try in their classrooms with an emphasis on group discussion and participation from all involved. All instructors are expected to prepare a "course mechanics" statement for their students and their advisor during the first week of classes. A departmental attendance policy and the name of the director of student affairs must be on that statement. Rather than tell them exactly what else they should include, we give them four or five sample statements which our teachers have used in the past. We do the same when talking about the first unit in the course. Three or four experienced graduate instructors talk about what they do for

the first three weeks and hand out a sample syllabus. By now the new graduate instructors are aware of the wide diversity of approaches which can be found in teaching the basic course.

All of this can be very frustrating to the new instructors. Some want to be told what to teach, when, and how to teach it. Although that is sometimes tempting and would frequently be easier for all of us, it does little to help the instructors become better teachers. This approach forces all of us to think seriously about the goals and objectives we as teachers establish for our course. It forces us to examine the activities and assignments in light of those objectives and to constantly be aware of the needs of our students. With a prescribed syllabus and required text, assignments, and exams, much of that process is lost. The instructors are merely acting out the script we have prepared for them. We are very open about the risk we are taking and continue to develop the informal and encouraging atmosphere which is critical to the success of our approach. We are attempting to establish a program where the new graduate instructors have a great deal of responsibility for their classes, where they truly are something more than teaching assistants. They must think through the course we are asking them to teach and make decisions about how they will teach it. Whenever possible, we try to give them examples of the range of approaches available but refuse to be prescriptive on most matters.

We also cover the traditional content and methodological issues most pre-service workshops focus on such as responding to student speeches and papers and leading discussions. The workshop is an experiential activity in that the graduate instructors complete writing and speaking assignments which are typical of those many will use with their freshmen during the first few weeks. While there is naturally some apprehension about these activities, the evaluations have always been very positive. We discuss the difficulty of fulfilling the dual roles of graduate student and graduate instructor, a topic where the credibility of the experienced graduate instructor is a tremendous asset. They are also warned about the "seduction of teaching" and reminded that they must continue to concentrate on their graduate work even though their teaching will consume an enormous amount of their time and energy.

The role of the experienced graduate instructor in the advisory groups is absolutely critical to the success of the program. They are competitively selected and paid an extra $1,000 for their participation in the workshop and the weekly seminars during the fall term. They are treated as co-leaders of their advisory groups and have equal status with the full-time faculty in planning and running the sessions. This is the first place where the new graduate instructors see that we are serious about the role we want them to play in our program. Everything we do in the workshop is designed to help the new graduate instructors become valuable members of our faculty.

<u>The in-service seminar.</u>

All new graduate instructors meet weekly for a two credit hour

seminar taught by the advisory group leaders. Providing graduate level credit for the seminar provides additional support for our commitment to teaching for the graduate instructors and the faculty. All experienced graduate instructors are also assigned to an advisory group with a full-time faculty advisor although they do not meet on a regular basis and receive no academic credit past the first term. All instructors provide their advisors with a "course mechanics" statement and a general plan or syllabus for the first few weeks of class early in each term. A typical session for the new graduate instructors will begin with everyone meeting together for coffee and announcements and perhaps discussion of general issues such as mid-term grade reports. Most of our weekly seminars allow the advisory groups to meet separately to share what the graduate instructors have been doing in class and what they plan to do for the next week or two. We continue to work on the content of their classes and discuss issues such as responding to student papers and speeches, how to lead a discussion of an essay, and how to structure assignments to meet the goals of the program. We put off the discussion of grading as long as possible since we prefer that instructors do not grade student work for the first few weeks. We endorse the full range of grading philosophy from those who grade virtually everything to those who do not assign a grade to any single piece of student work but use a more holistic approach. Again, the focus in our discussion of these topics is on providing a range of teaching behavior with the various advocates explaining their procedures, limitations, and benefits.

Around mid-term, all graduate instructors provide their teaching advisor with three student files containing speech outlines, notes, and instructor and peer responses, rough draft and finished papers, quizzes, and any other material handed out by the instructor or written by the student. The advisor responds to those files, commenting on the appropriateness, quality and number of the assignments as well as the quality of the instructor comments and grades. The files allow the advisor to look closely at the work of three students in each class taught by the graduate instructors. Since we ask them to select files which will demonstrate a range of performance, we can also comment on the degree to which we agree with their assessment of the student work. While the experienced graduate students do not receive credit for their participation it is a part of the condition for reappointment. The advisors are given credit for this work as part of their teaching load. This activity also allows the graduate instructor to ask the advisor for help in responding to the work of a student who is doing poorly or situations which are causing problems for the instructor. The advisors provide written responses to these materials for the graduate instructors and place copies in their departmental files.

This process is repeated at the end of each semester and the advisor responses along with other materials which may have been gathered concerning the teaching of the graduate instructors are placed in their departmental files. Although we do not require classroom visitations, the advisors frequently observe the graduate instructors upon request. We also encourage peer visitation and the use of our videotaping equipment to examine teaching. Our new

graduate instructors are asked to keep a journal of their teaching, focusing on description and evaluation. Many continue to keep such a journal throughout their professional careers. We also use a standard student evaluation of teaching form at the end of each semester. One part is the typical forced-choice questionnaire which gives us the departmental data we need for administrative purposes and the other is an open-ended form which generally proves much more valuable for each individual instructor. The graduate instructors are free to place whatever material they want from class handouts to student evaluations to responses to their advisors' comments in their departmental files. Our goal is to create a record of their success in the classroom through the use of peer comments, advisor responses, student evaluations, and self-evaluations and descriptions over several semesters. This process seems to work well when we act as advisors and teachers and treat the graduate instructors as colleagues. I am not so sure it would work as effectively if we were trainers and supervisors.

Summary.

The key element in establishing an effective Professional Development Program is to develop an appropriate atmosphere where the graduate instructors know they are viewed as valuable members of the faculty. That can only be done with the full cooperation and participation of the full-time faculty. Graduate instructors must be given freedom and responsibility and support. They need to know that the department values teaching and respects their contributions. The planning for next year's program needs to begin now with the involvement of the graduate instructors who are now on the staff. What did they appreciate and value from what you did this year? What did they need that they did not receive and what would they recommend for future sessions? The pre-service workshop ought to directly involve experienced graduate instructors and the majority of the faculty. The workshop and the weekly seminar meetings should be presented as necessary and valuable for the professional development of the entire faculty. Offering graduate credit for the graduate instructors and making it part of the teaching load for the full-time faculty helps establish it as a viable and important activity in the department. While there obviously are certain content and methodological issues which may be predetermined, the program must retain the flexibility to respond to the needs of the graduate instructors it serves. Instructors must be given degrees of freedom in the classroom if they are to learn their own skills, strengths, and limitations as teachers. We must allow them to go beyond acting out the scripts we have prepared for them if they are to grow as educators. Treating graduate instructors as colleagues and involving them in the process, giving them power and freedom, and valuing the teaching they do benefits the students, the graduate instructors, the faculty, and the university.

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